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Vaghe stelle dell'orsa (Of a thousand delights), Visconti, Luchino, 1965

La terra trema (The earth trembles), Visconti, Luchino, 1948

La caduta degli dei (The damned), Visconti, Luchino, 1969

Ludwig, Visconti, Luchino, 1972

Le notti bianche (White nights), Visconti, Luchino, 1957

Senso (The wanton contessa), Visconti, Luchino, 1954

LUCHINO VISCONTI The Films (1936-76)

Luchino Visconti (1906-76), aristocrat and Marxist, realist and melodramatist, is one of the giants of world cinema, and enjoyed an international reputation as an opera and theatre director as well. His film career began under the shadow of neo-realism and he retained the political commitment that went with it right to the end of his life. But his preferred style was never the low-key realism favoured by his contemporaries. The themes that interested him soon led him back into the past and – with *Senso* (1954), *The Leopard* (1963) and *Ludwig* (1973) – into historical recreation on a grand scale.

While his early work displays an optimistic view of historical progress, as time went on he became more interested in the downside and in a universe of irretrievable decadence in which the old is destroyed but nothing positive emerges to take its place. The family saga was one of his favourite narrative forms and in the early films hope is invested in the younger generation, but in the later films this hope is absent. Children die, or grow up corrupt, or the hero has no offspring and his family and the values he has grown up with die with him. A deep and moving sadness pervades these later films, in which elements of autobiography (including a negative judgement on his own homosexuality) are transmuted into a wider vision of the world of historical change.

More than anything else, though, his films are memorable for their visual qualities and for the extraordinary quality of the direction of actors. Whether dealing with the untutored fishermen of *La terra trema* (1948), or with stars like Alain Delon, Marcello Mastroianni, Romy Schneider or Dirk Bogarde, he always brought out the best in performers. Contemporary cinema has no one like him. – *Geoffrey Nowell-Smith*.

Although this season is as complete as possible, *L'Etranger* remains unavailable to the NFT.



26 Oct -
7 Nov

See
Summary
for full
playdate
information

Rocco is the most dramatic and spectacular of Visconti's family sagas and a key film in his development. A mother and her five sons emigrate from the impoverished South to make a living for themselves in the big city of Milan. The first brother settles for conformity, and the fourth becomes a skilled worker and trade union militant. But the pressures of urban life put an intolerable strain on the family as a whole. The second and third brothers are drawn into situations for which their traditional values have left them unprepared and tragedy erupts, from which only the last brother, still a child, emerges unscathed. Made half way through Visconti's film career, *Rocco* is the

film which best expresses the deep ambiguities of his approach both to subject matter and to style. While seemingly a throwback to neo-realism and Visconti's earlier epic, *La terra trema* (1948), its intense focus on the personal and individual human tragedy looks forward to the concerns of his later work. It is an explosive film, whose Marxist intellectual armature is blown apart by the power of the family melodrama it vainly seeks to contain. *Italy-France 1960*. With Alain Delon, Annie Girardot, Katina Paxinou, Renato Salvatori. Claudia Cardinale. 180 mins.

**Rocco and
His Brothers**

(Rocco e i suoi
fratelli)





9 Oct
Tue 6.30 NFT1

The Lower Depths

(Les Bas-fonds)

Tragedy and farce are brilliantly mixed in this film by Renoir (freely adapted from Gorky's play) about a ruined aristocrat who makes friends with a thief and goes to live with him. Visconti worked as an assistant on the film, picking up from it something of Renoir's way with actors. *France 1936/Dir Jean Renoir. With Jean Gabin, Louis Jouvet. Plus Renoir's magical Une Partie de Campagne (1936).*



10 Oct
Wed 6.30 NFT1

La Tosca

Renoir had just started shooting *La Tosca*, an adaptation of Sardou's melodrama incorporating music from Puccini's opera, when Italy declared war on France. Carl Koch finished it, with assistance from Visconti who had also worked on the adaptation. Renoir's intentions are faithfully realised, particularly in the use of authentic Roman locations. *Italy 1940/Dirs Jean Renoir, Carl Koch. With Imperio Argentina, Michel Simon, Rossano Brazzi.*



12 Oct
Fri 8.30 NFT1

Osessione

Made in semi-clandestine conditions in 1942, *Osessione* revealed an Italy the Fascists wanted swept under the carpet and heralded the neo-realist upsurge of the Liberation years. But the film is equally remarkable for its powerful treatment of themes of sexual passion and betrayal (based on Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) which Visconti was to develop on a grand scale in his later work. *Italy 1942. With Massimo Girotti, Clara Calamai.*



13 Oct
Sat 6.00 NFT2

Giorni di gloria

(Days of Glory)

Mario Serandrei, who was the editor of all Visconti's films until the late 60s, put together this compilation film about the Italian Resistance, for which Visconti directed the sequences on the trial of a collaborator. Made close to the dramatic and sometimes harrowing events it depicts, *Giorni di gloria* is a remarkable – and rarely seen – historical document. *Italy 1945.*



13 Oct
Sat 8.00 NFT2

La terra trema

An epic film, shot on location in a Sicilian fishing village with non-professional actors speaking their own local dialect, *La terra trema* tells the story of a family's struggle against harsh natural conditions and cruel economic exploitation. If *Osessione* was a forerunner of neo-realism, *La terra trema* as surely goes beyond it and has deservedly achieved classic status. The cameraman Aldo produces some of the greatest black-and-white images in all cinema. *Italy 1947. 161 mins.*

Visconti achieves an uncharacteristically light touch in this comedy about a working-class mum who enters her daughter for a beauty contest with a view to making her a child movie star. The satire of middle-class values is even more devastating than that of Cinecittà (personified by veteran director Alessandro Blasetti). *Italy 1951. With Anna Magnani. Plus Appunti su un fatto di cronaca (1951), and Visconti's episode from Siamo donne (1953). With Anna Magnani.*

17 Oct
Wed 6.10 NFT1

Bellissima



The story of passion and betrayal is the same as that of *Osessione*, but the canvas is wider. Visconti's first film in colour, *Senso* is set in the Risorgimento and the personal drama is played out against a historical backcloth of the betrayal of political ideals. The music (Verdi at the beginning, Bruckner throughout) is terrific, as are the wonderfully stylised battle scenes. *Italy 1954. With Alida Valli, Farley Granger.*

14 Oct
Sun 4.15 NFT1

Senso



Adapted from a story by Dostoyevsky and shot entirely in the studio, *White Nights* is a far cry from any form of cinematic realism, magically evoking a world of nostalgia and romance and the bittersweetness of love. Brilliant performances from Maria Schell and from Marcello Mastroianni as her (eventually) disappointed suitor. *Italy/France 1957. With Jean Marais. Plus Visconti's marital comedy Il lavoro, from Boccaccio 70, (1962). With Romy Schneider.*

29 Oct
Mon 6.00 NFT1

White Nights

(Le notti bianche)



A pivotal film in Visconti's career, *The Leopard* unites themes of family and history with a meditation on ageing and the passing of time. Burt Lancaster gives a commanding performance as the Sicilian patriarch whose place in the world is threatened by the new post-Risorgimento order. The film is being shown in the original, full-length, Technicolor version, with all of the final, mesmerisingly beautiful ball scene. *Italy-France 1962. With Claudia Cardinale, Alain Delon. 184 mins.*

13 Oct
Sat 4.30 NFT1

19 Oct
Fri 7.30 NFT1

The Leopard

(Il gattopardo)



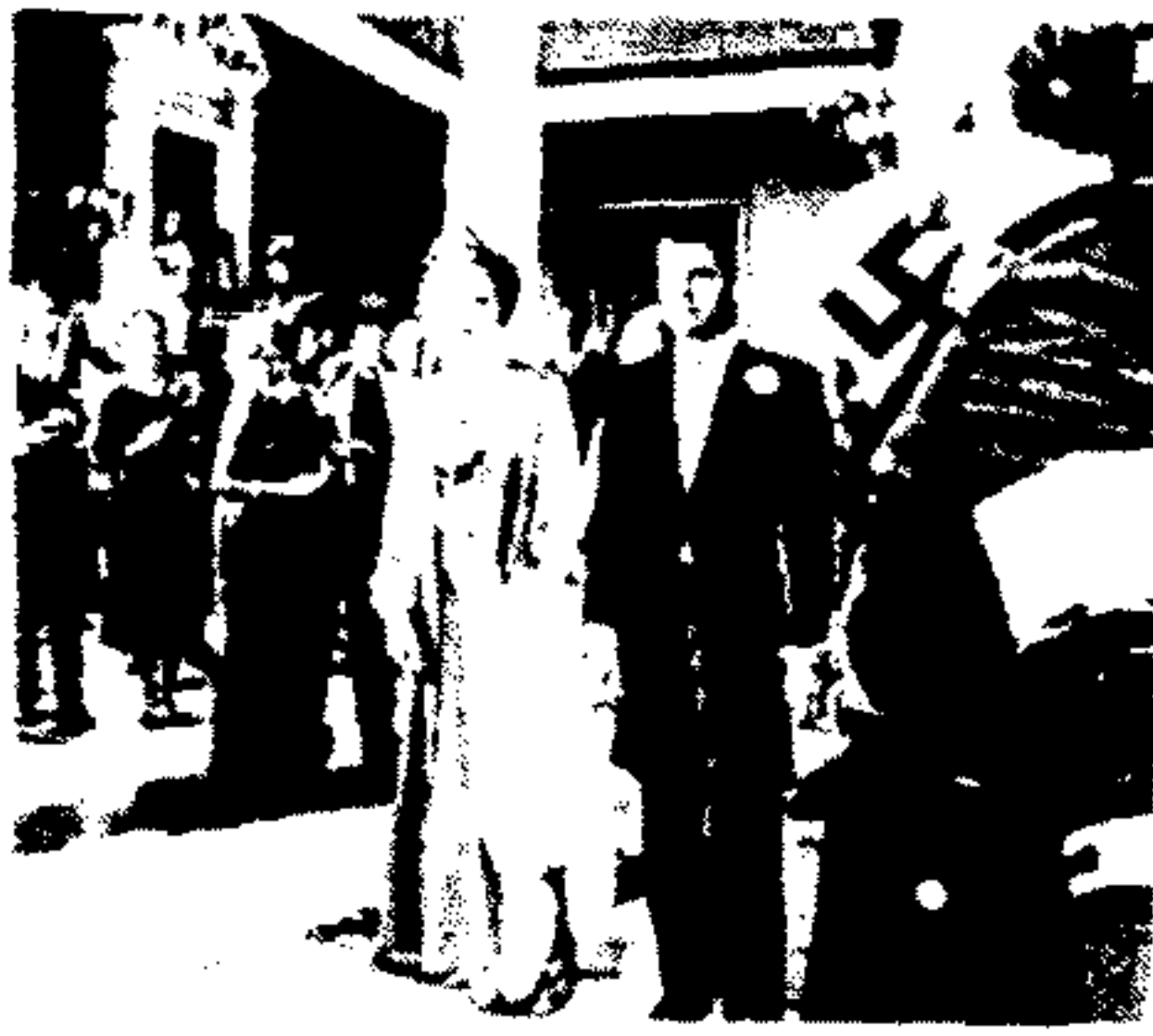
The most overtly melodramatic (and therefore least appreciated) of Visconti's films, *Sandra* has overtones of Jacobean tragedy but its main story is that of a modern Oresteia. The initial crime – a wife's suspected denunciation of her husband to the Nazis – sets off an inexorable cycle of crime and betrayal leading to the family's destruction. *Italy 1964. With Claudia Cardinale, Michael Craig.*

20 Oct
Sat 6.30 NFT1

Sandra

(Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa)
(aka Of a Thousand Delights)





23 Oct
Tue 6.00 NFT1

The Damned

(La caduta degli Dei:
Götterdämmerung)

Visconti's bleakest film, but one of great sweep and splendour, *The Damned* tells the story of a rich German family sucked into the Nazi maelstrom. The Essenbeck family is already on the verge of self-destruction and internal and external events combine to bring about its downfall. Helmut Berger's performance as the corrupt and decadent son is a tour de force. *Italy-Switzerland 1969. With Ingrid Thulin, Dirk Bogarde, Charlotte Rampling. 153 mins.*



30 Oct
Tue 6.10 NFT1

Death in Venice

(Morte a Venezia)

Another acting tour de force, this time from Dirk Bogarde, together with marvellous photography and superb use of music by Mahler, make this film a wonderful spectacle. But the adaptation of Thomas Mann's story is problematic, to say the least, and if you loved the book you may not like the film so much. *Italy-France 1971. With Björn Andresen, Silvana Mangano.*



31 Oct
Wed 6.00 NFT1

Ludwig

The last, and definitive, of Visconti's films on historical themes, *Ludwig* weaves the theme of homosexuality into his more usual concerns about class and family. The young King Ludwig of Bavaria, friend and patron of Wagner, is shown as a reluctant monarch and even more reluctant to propagate the family line. His eccentricities and extravagances which bring about his downfall are expressed through lavish spectacle. *Italy-France-Germany 1973. With Helmut Berger, Trevor Howard, Romy Schneider. 238 mins, plus interval.*



2 Nov
Fri 8.30 NFT1

Conversation Piece

(Gruppo di famiglia
in un interno)

The Italian title means 'family group in an interior' and it is indeed about a family (of sorts) and takes place entirely indoors. But the family in question is a woman, her husband and her lover, plus an ageing professor who lives in the flat below and is reluctantly drawn into a paternal relationship, particularly with the young lover. A strange, original and beautiful film. *Italy-France 1974. With Helmut Berger, Burt Lancaster, Silvana Mangano.*



12 Oct
Fri 6.00 NFT1
5 Nov
Mon 6.10 NFT1

The Intruder

(L'innocente)

Visconti's last film, and in a way his testament, *The Intruder* starts with a simple love triangle – man, wife and mistress – but the mood grows sombre when the wife gets pregnant by another man and husband conceives a mortal jealousy of the baby boy. A film of stunning beauty and unexpected subtlety of feeling. *Italy-France 1976. With Giancarlo Giannini, Laura Antonelli, Jennifer O'Neill.*